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Mr. James E. Taylor

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This interview is of Mr. James E. Taylor, a Black, formerly assistant principal of Jenkins High School. He is now employed at Savannah State College in the Core Curriculum Department.

Interviewed by: Debbie Ulmer and Donna Thomas

Q. Where were you born?

A. I was born at Rincon, Georgia.

Q. How long did you live there?

A. Well, I lived there all my life, really, until I was 18, at which time I moved away and went to Albany State College.

Q. How long were you there?

A. Two years and one quarter.

Q. Where is Rincon located?

A. Well, Rincon could very well be considered part of the coastal empire. It is in Effingham County. The county adjoining Chatham County. It's muchly centrally located within the county.

Q. Where did you go to elementary school?

A. Rincon Elementary.

Q. Was it segregated?

A. Yes, as a matter of fact it was segregated.

Q. Isn't Rincon Elementary School the only elementary school?

A. Well, of course, then, I guess you could say there were two Rincon Elementaries, and you had to make the distinction whether you're talking about the White school or the the Black school.

Q. Where was the Black school?

A. Well, we didn't have named streets at that time. I could, perhaps, describe it by saying the railroad was, perhaps, the central division in Rincon. Going north, the White was about a quarter of a mile on one side of the track and the Black school was about a quarter of a mile on the other side.

Q. Where did you go to high school?

A. Springfield Central High School.

Q. That's the Black School?

A. Yes. That school is now a junior high school since the coming of consolidation and desegregation.

Taylor-2

- Q. Well, in Rincon, did the railroad track divide the Black part from the White part?
- A. Not really. Although there was a distinctive Black section and it was called the "Ridge." This did not necessarily divide the two communities. In other words, some housing pretty much was in the same neighborhood.
- Q. Would you consider Rincon to be a very prejudiced neighborhood when you were growing up?
- A. Yes, I would say the town reflected many of the prejudices that were pretty prevalent in the South and in the country generally, really.
- Q. What did your dad do as a living?
- A. My dad, who died while I was very young-I was eight years old-was a railroad worker.
- Q. How did you get along after your father died?
- A. Well, it wasn't easy. There were six of us, and, of course, my mother worked quite "day's work" for the local citizenry. Of course, at a very early age, most of us were able to get employment here and yonder. We're talking about small type of employment-"day's work", yards, whatever.
- Q. What is "day's work"?
- A. Well, "day's work" is simply going to someone's house doing whatever task that was needed.
- Q. Like a maid?
- A. Yes, right.
- Q. How did you get to go to college? Did you get a scholarship or something?
- A. No, as a matter of fact, I didn't. I was offered one to Johnson C. Smith University. I turned that down because I was advised that there would be a great deal of out-of-town fee and it would not be profitable. Of course, I learned later that that was not the case. We did not have a high counselor. I finally decided to go to Albany State College. Upon my arrival, I think I had about seven dollars in my pocket, and I'd simply try to get jobs which I was successful in doing. And I was able to stay at Albany the two years and one quarter that I mentioned.

Taylor-3

Q. Did anyone else in your family go to college?

A. My younger sister later went to a business school. One older sister went to Savannah State for about two quarters.

Q. What did you study?

A. I initially studied biology. I wanted to be a biology major and perhaps go into medicine later. That interest changed somewhat after I served the Armed Forces. I became interested in social studies and history, and so that's what I ultimately majored in.

Q. When were you in the service?

A. I entered the Air Force in January of 1963. I served until December of 1966.

Q. How were Blacks received in the services then?

A. Well, during that time, as far as being received, certainly the recruiters did not discriminate. I think that many of the prejudices that have made the news recently- these were certainly prevalent during that time. Many of them were subtle forms of prejudices, but they in fact, were there.

Q. After you got out of the service, did you find it all that hard to get a job because you were Black?

A. Not really. Immediately after I got out of the military, I became a full time student at Savannah State College. I was able to secure employment at the college on a part time basis.

Q. Doing what?

A. Initially, I started off as a messenger. I later became a tutor counselor. I also was a research assistant in the department of history.

Q. After you received your degree what did you do?

A. I was able to secure a contract with the Board of Education immediately after I graduated. Of course, that first summer, I worked in one of the local stores-business, really-trying to gain some experiences in that area.

Q. Where was that?

A. I was manager trainee at Lums.

Q. Where was it located?

A. I started at the mall location. When the Victory Drive store opened up, I moved over. And, of course, I stayed there until the end of that summer. We're talking about the summer of 1959.

Q. After you graduated and got your degree, how were you treated as an educated Black? I know that a lot of times if a Black has a good education he's looked on as an "uppity" Black or something. Did you run up against that?

A. Are you referring to within the Black community or within the White?

Q. Both.

A. This is somewhat of an unfortunate phenomena. To begin with the Black community, I'm afraid there is some disdain accorded to quote "Black professionals" unquote. Many people seem to engender a feeling of distrust. Many feel that you are now a part of the establishment-that establishment being primarily the White establishment. As far as the White community, I think I ran into a few instances where some people simply were not convinced that I in fact, was a professional qualified to do the job that I was hired to do. And in this particular case that was of teaching U. S. History. I think that I, perhaps, did encounter subtle forms from both communities.

Q. Did you ever teach U. S. history?

A. Yes, in fact, I did.

Q. Where?

A. At Jenkins High School, I taught for two years.

Q. What were some of your experiences in the classroom?

A. Well, that situation was certainly a new challenge for me, and, as a matter of fact, for many of my students. For the most part, I was able to get my students to work with me, to cooperate. As a matter of fact, it was a rare situation where we had someone who was simply turned off. And we did have a few, but I think that this was sort of a rare situation.

Q. Did you have any problem with the students for your being Black?

Taylor-5

- A. Very few, as I alluded to earlier. I can recall some students, one in particular that I can recall. We had a situation whereby we had mass study halls. That was a tense situation, and it always was a potential problem lurking. For instance, if one were to show up late for study hall, that student had to stand against the wall for a certain length of time. Of course, the teachers were required to enforce this rule. I can distinctly recall that that type of request from myself to some students seemed to have created some hard feelings. As a matter of fact, I have had students simply say they were not going to do it. In most cases, when it came down to the academic work, I was able to convince most of my students that the activities we were going through were necessary for their own educational growth, and not any favor that they were doing for me.
- Q. Were you the traditional lecture-type teacher?
- A. Indeed I was not. While there were occasions where we lectured, we did many things in my classroom. It was more or less a centered classroom, and we made sure that our approach was a varied one in hopes of meeting the various interests that were present in the classroom.
- Q. Do you find as much prejudice in the young people as maybe you do in the older generation?
- A. I certainly do not. I have not thrown up my hands to say the world is going to the dogs because of the younger generation. I have certainly witnessed certain staunch feelings of prejudice and bigotry on the part of the older generation. And I certainly see an erosion of this philosophy on the part of many, many young people. I'm not saying that it's completely erased, but I certainly think there has been an improvement.
- Q. Why do you think this is so?
- A. I see the period we are going through now as sort of a period of enlightenment. People are beginning to look at things, not from the stand point of certain myths or anything that somebody has tried to pass on to them, but people are looking at things for themselves. They are realizing how very small this world is. They are realizing how very insignificant each person might be standing alone, but, in fact, they are realizing the great potential for humanity by sticking together and working on our common problems together.
- Q. What did you do after you were a teacher?
- A. After two years in the classroom as a U.S. history teacher, I moved into the office at Jenkins High School as an assistant principle.

Q. What year ?

A. This was in 1971.

Q. You were assistant principal during the first year that bussing started.

A. Yes, as a matter of fact, I was.

Q. What kind of experiences did you run into that year ?

A. It would take me about a week to describe that one. However, we certainly did have some trying times at Jenkins High School. I want to mention here that the year prior to the massive desegregation plan involving bussing, we tried to set some groundwork at Jenkins High School. "We" meaning some Whites and Blacks. We had done some considerable work. There were certain issues left unresolved. Some of them I consider very petty, but they were, in fact, some which caused people's tempers to flare. As a matter of fact, when desegregation came on a large scale, we started off working on certain unresolved problems like how many editors we were going to have on the paper or whether there would, in fact, be a mixed majorette corps or whether we would have co-editors of the yearbook just started off some of the fears. After we had a few unfortunate incidents, then we simply had a situation where students were going at one another simply because the person was of the other color. Many of the issues had long since been resolved, and you simply had a rather irrational period of conflict. Certainly I was pretty much in the middle of it all. Of course, I have sort of given a recap of what happened. I realize your question was what were my experiences. I can only say that I was close by in much of the turmoil.

Q. Being part of the establishment in a formerly white school, how were you accepted by the Blacks that year ?

A. That was certainly a question in my mind, also. I think perhaps my answer came in a meeting which was held at one of the local churches where the issues involving the problems we were having were being hashed out. My name, in fact, did not come up for a long period of time, and I was hoping that it would come up one way or the other. Finally, during a meeting, one of our parents finally got up and made a statement regarding what she thought my performance was. She was pleased with what I was trying to do, and she asked that body to voice an opinion one way or the other. Of course, she did not put it like that, but at least to voice support for me in my position, and, of course, the response was over-whelming, and I felt very good.

However, this is not to suggest that there was not some distrust, but most people, who took the time to get to know me, realized that I was trying to do the things that would keep the school together, that would give every student an opportunity for full participation in the school program. These were my goals, and, of course, I voiced them to Blacks and Whites. There was never any secret what I was trying to do.

Q. Who attended this meeting ?

A. As a matter of fact, many of our teachers. The teachers - the Black teachers in particular at Jenkins - were invited to the meeting. Parents, local interested persons, the media was there, as a matter of fact. It was more or less a community meeting, and it was not sponsored by any particular group other than the fact that interested people were invited to come.

Q. Black people ?

A. Yes, for the most part.

Q. Were you ever referred to as an "Oreo cookie"?

A. As a matter of fact, not in those terms.

Q. But you know what I mean ?

A. Yes, I certainly know what you mean, and I can't recall some of the terms, but certainly during time that tempers flared, I was the object of certain words which were not exactly complimentary. I was expected to choose sides. I may have been expected to do that on the part of both sides. And, of course, this particular subject came up in connection with disciplinary action, too, on a couple of occasions. This was certainly not a regular thing. If the student was the object of some disciplinary action on my part, then I was "selling out" - I think the term had been used. Of course, as long as that student was not the object of any disciplinary action of anything, then "Mr. T." was a great guy.

Q. Well, what do you think was the main - if there could be a main - problem at Jenkins so far as the racial tension ?

A. In attempting to answer that question as it pertains to Jenkins High School, I am compelled to fit our incident into the bigger picture. Now, first of all, I think now, and I felt then that it was totally unrealistic to assume that two communities living apart for so many years with all the fears and suspicions and hostilities would suddenly come together and peacefully pursue an education without more support from the community. This means the leaders in government. This means the business community, parent groups. But, in fact,

during the time we were asked to perform this virtually impossible task, most of the community leaders were, in fact, silent. And the only voices which were very vocal came from such groups as the Concerned Parents and the Black Concerned Parents and so forth, and these people were merely screaming at one another. And, in fact, this overshadowed any sober voice and leadership which should have come from the government and community leaders not only here in Savannah, but all over the country. And, so I see the problems at Jenkins as sort of a microcosm of that bigger problem.

Q. Have you ever written any books or anything?

A. I have co-authored two articles. These were written when I was an undergraduate here at Savannah State. These were co-authored with Dr. Hanes Walton, Jr.

Q. What did they deal with?

A. These articles dealt with the role of Black people in the southern prohibition movement. One of the articles is entitled, "The Negro in the Southern Prohibition Movement." The other one is entitled, "Blacks, the Prohibitionists, and Disfranchisement." The latter dealing with the role of prohibitionists to disfranchise or take the vote away from Black people, and of course they used as a basis the fact that, at least the assumed fact that, Black people were supporting the liquor interest.

Q. What are you doing now?

A. At present, I am curriculum co-ordinator for the Trio program at Savannah State College.

Q. What do you do?

A. As curriculum co-ordinator, I am responsible for all activities within Trio that are of an instructional nature. And I might need to explain two things here. One: Trio is made up of three federally funded projects; 1) Upward Bound, a project designed to serve high school students who have potential who, due to the lack of motivation, may not be living up to this potential; 2) Talent Search, another program designed to serve high school students with exceptional talent but who, due to the lack of counsel and so forth, have not been able to come up with realistic goals. We have several contracts with these students. We put them in touch with colleges. We find financial aid for them and so forth. The third program is Special Services, a tutoring and counseling service here on campus designed to provide tutoring for mostly freshmen and sophomores here at Savannah State. And so, my job involves supervision of teaching personnel in Project Upward Bound. It involves the operation of a tutorial program at Savannah State College. We use college students for the tutoring purposes.

These people have been recommended by their department heads. The other phase of my work involves the development of innovative curricular for the various programs, which involves some research. Right now we are working on modular scheduling as a means of updating the curriculum primarily in Project Upward Bound.

Q. What kind of school academically would you say Savannah State is?

A. We certainly feel that Savannah State College is a very viable institution. That is, in providing the type of education which will equip our students to compete in today's world and, in fact, equip them with what they will need to compete and participate in tomorrow's world. We certainly are proud of what's going on in our science department. There are many new things on in the technical science division. We have traditionally had a strong program in teacher education. I personally think that we have something going here at Savannah State College.

Q. You mentioned the science department. What's going on?

A. We have, first of all, a very modern and well equipped science building. This facility has allowed our teaching personnel as well as our students to expand into the field of more research and experimentation. I cannot converse in the scientific lingo to describe all of the various organisms that they are working with, but a recent tour through that building convinced me that we do have some very interesting things going on.

Q. How are the two schools, Armstrong and Savannah State, cooperating together today?

A. The first thing that comes to my mind is the joint graduate program. This is a system whereby students will take courses here at Savannah State as well as at Armstrong. The degree which is conferred bears Savannah State's name and seal as well as that Armstrong's. Both presidents sign the certificate. We feel that the joint graduate program is certainly in operation and successful. The other thing is the exchange of courses with the shuttle bus operating between the two campuses. I think that this operation has greatly expanded the offerings available to the students in our community.

Q. Is the graduate program beneficial to the colleges or to the students?

A. I would say both. I think that the benefits to the students are perhaps more readily observable or recognizable. However, we can see that in order for these institutions to remain attractive to students in our community as well as around the country, they will need to continue to provide this type of instructional program. And so, from that respect, one can certainly discern that the operation of such a program is

is profitable to the colleges themselves.

Q. Do you see in the future that perhaps Savannah State and Armstrong would combine?

A. Yes, the nature of this -- we've heard a lot of terms here lately, merge or whatever -- it's hard to speculate. However, I can foresee when these two campuses will in fact be two locales of the same facility. And as a matter of fact, this is something that is perhaps long overdue.

Q. Tell us what you know about Daddy Grace.

A. My information on Daddy Grace is rather scanty. However, he was somewhat of a self-styled prophet, who was able to get a very large following. Many people actually believed that he, in fact, was sent by God to liberate them and the world. This man has set up temples all over the country. In many of his temples, people can go to worship. If they are hungry they can go for food. Of course, many people believed that Daddy Grace would never die. He, in fact, did die some years ago. However, his predecessors have carried on pretty much the same type of program which was instituted by Daddy Grace some years ago.

Q. Who were his predecessors?

A. One Daddy McCullough, I think he's called, has sort of stepped into the shoes of Daddy Grace. He has, as I say, pretty much the same pattern. They do have temples all over. As a matter of fact, there is a very large and beautiful temple here in Savannah which is located over on Ogeechee Road.